



# VU Research Portal

## Reinventing the Republic: Gender, Migration and citizenship in France. Catherine Raissiguier [Review of: C. Raissiguier (2010) Reinventing the Republic. Gender, Migration and Citizenship in France]

van Walsum, S.K.

### ***published in***

Immigrants & Minorities

2011

### ***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1080/02619288.2011.577638](https://doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2011.577638)

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### ***citation for published version (APA)***

van Walsum, S. K. (2011). Reinventing the Republic: Gender, Migration and citizenship in France. Catherine Raissiguier [Review of: C. Raissiguier (2010) Reinventing the Republic. Gender, Migration and Citizenship in France]. *Immigrants & Minorities*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2011.577638>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

This article was downloaded by: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]

On: 22 December 2011, At: 08:28

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Immigrants & Minorities

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fimm20>

### Reinventing the Republic: Gender, Migration, and Citizenship in France

Sarah Van Walsum<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> VU Univeristy (Vrije Universiteit) Amsterdam

Available online: 01 Aug 2011

To cite this article: Sarah Van Walsum (2011): Reinventing the Republic: Gender, Migration, and Citizenship in France, *Immigrants & Minorities*, DOI:10.1080/02619288.2011.577638

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2011.577638>



PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Reinventing the Republic: Gender, Migration, and Citizenship in France**

CATHERINE RAISSIGUIER

Stanford, Stanford University, 2010

195 pp., ISBN: 978 0 8047 5761 4, \$60.00 (cloth); ISBN: 978 0 8047 5762 1, \$22.95 (paper)

The academic literature on migration is vast, as is that on migration policy. But while there has been a growing interest in the role that family norms, gender and sexuality play in migration as a human activity, their role in the regulation of that activity remains understudied and under-theorised. Raissiguier's book focuses on that intersection and as such forms an important contribution to existing scholarship.

In her analysis, Raissiguier places the *sans papiers* (illegal immigrants) struggling against restrictive migration policies in the same tradition as other 'impossible subjects' who have challenged the tenets of French republicanism: feminists and gay activists. Where feminists have gendered the French Republic, and gays have exposed its sexuality, the *sans papiers* reveal the national limits of its universalist claims, as well as its racial bias. In her description of the *sans papiers* movement, Raissiguier shows how dominant assumptions concerning family norms, gender and racialised national identity are mutually constitutive. She posits that a disruption in one set of assumptions destabilises the others, and calls for a coalition of all groups excluded by the French republic to resist a universalist tradition that denies claims based on difference and minority status.

To provide a focused review, it is useful to discuss two aspects of Raissiguier's study in particular, namely Raissiguier's concept of the 'impossible subject' – that is the development of the concept through her description and analysis of the role women have played in the *sans papiers* movement; and her use of the concept to link that movement to other movements of political resistance in France.

Raissiguier uses the term impossible subjects to express three things. First, the impossible social conditions in which certain groups of persons find themselves vis-à-vis dominant notions of citizenship, driving them to engage in struggle. Secondly, the nature of their struggle, one that is unruly,

destabilising both dominant notions of citizenship and dominant representations of their own subjectivity. Thirdly, the fact that these groups must speak in terms that express a logic that denies their own subjectivity. In claiming citizenship, they risk reproducing the binaries that construct exclusion: public versus private; natural versus perverse; deserving versus undeserving. Put in other terms, the notion of impossible subjects serves to express how the contradictions inherent to French Republicanism become manifest in the lived experiences and agency of those caught up in those contradictions.

Raissiguier quotes the experiences of migrant women in France, as recorded by these women themselves and by feminist interviewers in the late 1990s, to flesh out her notion of the impossible subject. This results in a detailed and sensitive account of the history of the *sans papiers* movement in France, and particularly of the women involved in that movement. This account is contrasted with representations of migrant women in the French media and in legal texts and administrative practices. Raissiguier focuses in particular on the issue of family reunification, since it is through this lens that migrant women's subjectivity has been constructed in dominant discourse, and their political and economic agency ignored or denied. In her analysis, it is a deeply rooted patriarchal understanding of citizenship that has turned migrant women into impossible subjects. Forced to accept a derivative family-related status in order to qualify for admission, they are at the same time disqualified from substantive citizenship on the grounds of that same derivative status. As wives and daughters, they are presented as the victims of family practices depicted as antithetical to the Republic. As (potential) mothers, they are represented as the reproducers of those same family practices, hence as a threat to the Republic.

In resisting these mechanisms, the *sans-papiers* quoted by Raissiguier lay claim to citizenship on the basis of their autonomy and agency as workers, as activists and as women who have refused to play a passive and dependent role as mother, spouse or daughter. That which, in dominant discourse, places them outside the realm of citizenship – their loss or rejection of derivative status – forms the basis of their own unruly claim to citizenship. In rejecting dominant perceptions of intimacy and citizenship, and the relationship between them, the *sans-papiers* share common ground, Raissiguier argues, with women and gays struggling against their position as impossible subjects. In Raissiguier's vision, such connections could lead to a coalition of queers, feminists and migrants who want to broaden definitions of couples, marriage, family, and hence, of possible citizenship.

Despite its deep contradictions, she claims, French republicanism does offer powerful resistive tools to all who are excluded from rights in France.

Raissiguier's book offers important insights into how, in the French context, migration control intersects with politics of gender and sexuality. Much of what the study describes concerning the situation in France coincides with my own observations concerning the Netherlands. I have some doubts, however, about the political analysis. While discourses on migration, gender and sexuality undeniably intersect, the nature of this dynamic is not fixed. Nor is it predictable. Raissiguier suggests that when feminists and gay activists succeed in destabilising the patriarchal foundations of dominant notions of citizenship, this will in itself provide openings for migrants (and particularly migrant women) to challenge their own exclusion from citizenship.

The experience of the Netherlands shows that this need not be the case. The emancipatory discourses of feminists and gay activists can and have been appropriated by the Dutch state to reformulate dominant notions of citizenship in ways that exclude migrants as radically as before, if not more so. Where Raissiguier criticises the French migration regime for only admitting migrant women who are wives or mothers of French citizens, the Dutch state, in the name of protecting women's autonomy, is now excluding all categories of migrant women, including those who are wives and mothers of Dutch citizens. And, rather than opening up Dutch society to an array of family forms, the emancipation of women and homosexuals in Dutch family law has actually helped legitimate the exclusion of migrants, particularly those from Islamic countries, on the grounds of their putatively patriarchal lifestyles. Destabilizing dominant notions of citizenship is not enough. Establishing more inclusive notions of citizenship requires political clout. To achieve this, many coalitions will have to be formed. On that point, certainly, Raissiguier and I agree.

© 2011 SARAH VAN WALSUM

VU Univeristy (*Vrije Universiteit*) Amsterdam

E-mail: *s.k.van.walsum@vu.nl*